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ABSTRACT

This profile in outline form examines the English language teaching situation in Japan and the role of English in the Japanese educational system and society. The following are examined: (1) the growing role of English in business and science, and in Japan's image abroad; (2) the role of English in all levels of the Japanese educational system, where English is not compulsory but widely studied; (3) English examinations; (4) English syllabuses for junior and senior high schools, which are standardized by the Ministry of Education; (5) English instruction supervisors; (6) the make-up of the teaching cadre, which in state institutions consists of Japanese nationals; (7) teacher training facilities and standards; and (8) the great demand for commercial language schools which employ native speakers and stress communicative skills, which are not developed within the educational system. (AM)

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ENGLISH-TEACHING INFORMATION CENTRE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROFILE

Country: JAPAN

June 1977

1. THE DEMAND FOR ENGLISH

1.1 English is not the medium of instruction in Japan nor is it used as a medium of communication within Japan except in Japanese relations with international organisations and firms having offices in Japan. There is evidence, however, that some Japanese scientists and economists communicate in a mixture of Japanese and English and that certain technical and scientific documents are tending to be written in English because of the lack of precision of the Japanese language. English is considered as of vital importance to Japan in her increasing desire to improve her commercial, political and cultural image abroad. One result of this is the running of English teaching programmes for their staff by Japanese Government agencies and business and industrial firms. The Government/business funded Institute for International Studies and Training at Fujinomiya is the most important of a number of such centres which aim at forming the 'international Japanese man'.

1.2 The demand for English has grown very rapidly and, as a result of the increased need for practical command of the spoken language, a great number of private schools of English have sprung up to provide tuition in oral English, which is not usually taught with a great deal of success in the majority of schools. In the last three years or so the numbers of Japanese travelling overseas for the purpose of attending courses at language schools to improve their spoken English has likewise risen rapidly. An estimated 5,000 Japanese students attended ARELS member schools in Britain in 1975. A 1973 BTA survey shows that Japanese students account for about 5% of the student enrolment in member schools. This compares favourably with the 7.5% of places filled by French students, given the greater distance of Japan from Britain.

2. ENGLISH WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

2.1 English is not taught in Government primary schools although it is being taught in an increasing number of private primary schools. Contrary to what is generally believed, English (or any other foreign language), is not a compulsory subject in Japanese secondary schools. However, largely because of the compulsory English paper in the University Entrance Examinations, there appear to be no Government secondary schools which do not require their pupils to take English as a subject. This is also true of private secondary schools, although a small number also teach French.

2.2 English is taught in all the 900-odd Japanese Universities and Colleges.

2.3 Secondary English, although not officially compulsory, is taught in all Junior and Senior High Schools, both public and private.

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Number of hours per week -	Junior High School; (Age 12 - 15)	General English	3 hrs
" " " " " -	Senior High School; (Age 15 - 18)	General Course 'English A'	3 hrs
		Advanced Course 'English B"	5 hrs

These figures are subject to variation in different prefectures. In some cases unallocated hours in the school week may, at the discretion of the Prefectural Board of Education or the school governors be devoted to the study of English.

2.4 University A foreign language (in practice English) is compulsory in the first two years (General Education Course). The number of hours per week varies and is usually divided into periods of 'English' (which may include some literature and translation from English into Japanese - commonly known as 'composition') and 'English Conversation' which is the Japanese name for any language teaching involving the use of oral English. In the last two years of the 4-year university course, English language is not compulsory. However, a substantial number of undergraduates do continue studying English. There is evidence that this is particularly true of students of economics, science and technology. Many undergraduates who feel they have an incentive to improve their ability in spoken English attend private language schools and often watch or listen to radio and TV ELT programmes and participate in the activities of the student organised English Speaking Societies (ESS) which make commendable efforts to make up for university failure to pay sufficient attention to spoken English. Undergraduates specialising in English literature tend to concentrate on the written word, as do the majority of their teachers. Few lecturers in English literature are interested in the teaching of language, although most have to do some, because literature teaching has the greater prestige. The typical English literature lecture (there is no British-type seminar or tutorial system in Japanese universities) consists of talking in Japanese about the text under consideration and student participation tends to be limited to exercises in translation. Many university teachers of English literature have limited ability in spoken English and very few actually give their lectures in English, even though they may be qualified to do so. Most of the larger national universities and the private universities in the main urban areas employ part or full-time foreign teachers to take classes in spoken English ('English Conversation' in the Japanese terminology). In a substantial proportion of the more important universities and colleges full-time foreign teachers are employed for this purpose and they are often asked to teach English literature in English.

3. EXAMINATIONS

3.1 The Japanese education system is characterised by a series of entrance examinations from Kindergarten to university. Open competition is ensured by a hierarchy of entrance examination hurdles between which teaching tends to be influenced by the entrance examination to the next step up the educational ladder. The only exception to this is the university since, after the entrance examinations, further tests tend to be a formality and few students are ever failed. There is no system of external examinations on the British pattern.

3.2 Primary Education There are no English examinations in primary schools. A few private primary schools enter pupils for the Trinity College Examinations in Spoken English.

3.3 Lower Secondary Education There is no English test for entrance to Junior High School. During the course of their lower secondary school career, pupils may take the lowest of the 4 grades of the Ministry of Education approved STEP English language tests. These examinations in practical English comprehension (written and oral) together with a short oral test are run by the Society for the Testing of English Proficiency. STEP tests are taken by some 750,000 - 800,000 candidates annually. The number of secondary school pupils taking these examinations is not known.

3.4 The results of the STEP tests do not appear to mirror ability in spoken English accurately.

3.5 Upper Secondary Education English is in practice a required subject in the Entrance Examination to Senior High School. The test is usually one set by the Prefectural Board of Education. English teaching in the Senior High School is adversely influenced by the University Entrance Examinations which set a written paper and generally require no evidence of any oral proficiency in the language. A fairly large number of Senior High School pupils take the lower grades of the STEP tests mentioned above.

3.6 Post-Secondary Education The principal examination in English language at the university level is the University Entrance Examination paper in English. Each University in Japan sets its own paper, though there is a committee working on plans to unify these examinations. The types of papers set by universities vary greatly, but a large proportion of them put great emphasis on the translation or comprehension of difficult texts and on knowledge of formal grammar. Some of the papers would be difficult for the average native speaker of English to take. The more enlightened universities, however, are now increasingly setting papers which are of a more modern type and place more emphasis on the comprehension of appropriate modern texts plus essay type question. There are usually no oral tests at university entrance. In general the universities most esteemed in Japan tend to set the most difficult and old-fashioned papers, thus adversely influencing the teaching in the Senior High School.

After university entrance there are usually no more formal English language examinations but individual departments and teachers set papers which are marked to assess the grades of credits awarded for attendance at courses. It is not the usual practice to fail students in these internal tests. A degree is awarded at the end of the university course if a sufficient number of credits have been obtained. A small number of credits may be allotted to the preparation of a graduation thesis. In the case of undergraduates specialising in English this will usually be a dissertation on some aspect of English or American literature or linguistics. At some universities there is an oral examination for students who aspire to entry to the course for the master's degree.

4. ENGLISH SYLLABUSES

4.1 The syllabuses of Junior and Senior High Schools are laid down by the Ministry of Education. These syllabuses are at present under review. Although it is stated that the objective is to help pupils to achieve a balance of linguistic skills, this aim is not generally achieved. The low oral competence of the majority of secondary school teachers, the grammar-translation requirements of the examination system, traditional attitudes towards language teaching and the almost total absence of practical ELT training for graduates intending to become teachers combine to largely nullify the good intentions stated in the introduction to the official

syllabus. However, recent improvements, especially in the oral competence of Junior High School teachers and in the quality of Junior High School textbooks, are resulting in better teaching in the early years of secondary school English. The Senior High School, although benefiting from some improvement in textbooks, greater availability of audio aids, and an increasing proportion of teachers fluent in English, is subject to the requirements of the university entrance examinations mentioned above and also to the considerable pressure parents bring to bear on teachers to concentrate on preparing their children for these examinations.

5. INSPECTORATE

5.1 There is no Inspectorate in the British sense of the term in the Japanese education system. What is known as the inspectorate in Japan is mainly concerned with ensuring that schools are run in conformity with the education laws and are properly administered. However, there are at Prefectural level, teacher consultants and at least one in every Prefecture specializes in English. These consultants whose main function is to advise teachers of English, are often in charge of in-service training centres elaborately equipped with language laboratories, closed circuit TV and recording studios. The consultants vary greatly in professional competence and in the length of their appointments. In some Prefectures they are permanent appointees whilst in others they are classroom teachers (not always the most able), seconded from their schools for a couple of years - sometimes just prior to retirement. Some teacher consultants are only conversant with written English and have virtually no oral ability. Others, often teachers who have been trained abroad, eg under the Fulbright scheme, or on Council scholarships, are competent professionals with a fluent command of English. In all the Prefectures that run in-service courses the assistance of native speakers of English is sought in running training seminars for serving teachers. For the most part these seminars concentrate on language improvement, rather than on methodology.

6. TEACHING CADRE

6.1 Only Japanese nationals can hold permanent appointments in Government schools. National Universities only appoint foreign staff to a special cadre created for the purpose. Private schools and universities may appoint foreign teachers to permanent posts.

6.2 The number of non-Japanese nationals holding English teaching posts in Japanese secondary schools and universities is not known. It is possible however that the number exceeds 500. Their qualifications vary greatly and the majority are American. The number of British nationals so employed is probably about 50.

6.3 There are some 60,000 teachers of English in Japanese schools and 5,000 in universities and colleges. They teach English to some 13 million pupils.

6.4 Teachers of English in secondary schools are required to have taken a degree incorporating a certain number of credits in required subjects, eg English, Educational Administration, the Japanese Constitution, and teaching practice. The latter is usually of two weeks' duration. To teach in the schools of any particular Prefecture, a teacher must pass that Prefectural Education Board's qualifying examination. This is generally a written test.

6.5 Teacher Training Facilities There is no teacher training system as it

is understood in Britain. The Teacher Training Colleges (Normal Schools and Higher Normal Schools) were abolished in the American inspired reforms after the war. The so-called Universities of Education which replaced the higher normal schools are tertiary institutions of university status with stronger Departments of Education than other universities. They usually have attached secondary schools which provide opportunities for teaching practice and some educational research. Only about 30% of the graduates of Universities of Education in fact become teachers. A handful of Normal Schools emerged from the post-war reforms retaining an officially recognised teaching-training function and they concentrate to a considerable extent on producing graduates with the appropriate qualifications to become primary school teachers. Like Universities of Education they have attached primary and, sometimes, secondary schools. A somewhat higher proportion of their graduates in fact enter the teaching profession since nearly all of them leave with the required credits for registration as teachers.

6.6 University teachers of English are not required to have any special teaching diploma but most have taken a post graduate degree in English literature, linguistics or language and many have secondary school teaching experience.

6.7 In-Service Training Facilities In-service courses for teachers are the responsibility of the Prefectural Boards of Education. Courses for Teachers of English are run by the Teacher Consultants (English) at the Prefectural Education Research and In-Service Training Institutes. They vary greatly in duration and quality. Some are mere language laboratory sessions whilst others, eg those at the Hokkaido Institute for Educational Research and In-Service Training, and the Osaka Prefectural Science Teaching Institute, which are assisted by the British Council, are courses adapted to the needs of serving teachers. Some Prefectural Education Centres are to all intents and purposes inactive as far as ELT is concerned. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with the British Council has recently set up schemes for short ELT courses in Britain for University teachers of English.

7. COMMERCIAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

7.1 In view of the fast increasing demand for oral competence in English and the inability of the official educational system to satisfy it, it is not surprising that a vast private English teaching industry has grown up in Japan, employing hundreds, if not thousands of foreigners who - even if not invariably native speakers - can speak English. There are no towns of any size in Japan that do not have English conversation schools and in addition large companies and industrial plants run their own English teaching programmes or arrange these on a contract basis with commercially run English teaching organisations. Standards vary from very low to professionally competent.

8. GENERAL STATEMENT

8.1 English is considered by the Japanese to be more important to them than it has ever been in the past and the demand for ability in spoken English is great and growing. The rapidly increasing numbers of Japanese who travel abroad, especially to Britain, for courses in English is witness to this, as is the large and flourishing 'English Conversation School' industry.

8.2 Unfortunately, however, the weaknesses of English teaching in schools,

coupled with the effects of the University Entrance Examinations and the lack of any real initial professional training for teachers of English, combine to frustrate the underlying desire to achieve a better balance of linguistic skills. This desire is largely a product of Japan's increasing wish to understand and become an acceptable part of the world community.

8.3 There are however brighter signs on the horizon. Firstly, the reform of the university entrance examination system is now under serious consideration and there may well be changes for the better within the near future. Secondly, the Ministry of Education Textbook Authorisation Bureau is much more flexible in its attitudes than it used to be and more modern materials are now acceptable. Thirdly, there is a growing feeling in Ministry circles that teacher-training is due for re-organisation - although it must be pointed out that the Japan Teachers' Union has tended to reject Government suggestions that special institutions for professional training should be created. Fourthly, the standards of all-round ability in English are rising and the vastly increased possibilities of overseas travel are contributing to create motivation to acquire a balance of skills in English. Lastly, the rising number of Japanese teachers of English who are going abroad, often at their own expense, to undertake ELT courses is contributing to higher oral standards and the growth of a better status for ELT as a respectable specialisation.